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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 001332

DEPT FOR EUR/SCE (P. PETERSON)

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: SERBIAN DEFENSE MINISTER AND ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF IN OPEN  
CONFLICT

Summary

1. (SBU) A simmering conflict between Serbia's civilian and military defense leaders burst into the open with a front-page interview in which Army Chief of Staff Zdravko Ponos boldly criticized Minister of Defense Dragan Sutanovac and alleged that Serbia had neither a national security strategy nor a defense policy, and that army reform had stopped. With Sutanovac poised to fight back vigorously, the feud could result in a shake-up within Serbia's defense structures. End summary.

Ponos and General Staff Snub Sutanovac

2. (U) After several months of tension between Minister of Defense Dragan Sutanovac and Chief of Staff of the Army of Serbia Lieutenant General Zdravko Ponos, the conflict burst into the open on December 18 when Ponos and his general staff failed to attend Sutanovac's annual holiday reception. The move prompted several days of speculation in the media regarding the balance of power between the two.

Ponos Takes His Case Public

3. (U) Ponos turned up the heat in a lengthy interview published on the front page of "Politika" December 24, in which he alleged that military reform had stopped and that the Ministry of Defense had "no plan." He added that Serbia has no national security strategy and thus no defense policy, attributing the lack of guidance to "incompetence, irresponsibility, incapability, and arrogance." Criticizing the way the Ministry of Defense has managed its budget, Ponos stressed that citizens of Serbia must know how funds are being spent ..., and nobody knows that today except those who are doing the spending. This is a conflict between the existing concept of the General Staff and the lack of any concept of the Ministry of Defense." Ponos said that his conflict with Sutanovac was not personal, but rather reflected a clash between the two opposing strategies on "where Serbia, as a free country, should be in 2010 or 2015, security wise."

Sutanovac Fights Back

4. (SBU) "Blic" reported that in response to Ponos's recent behavior, Sutanovac had arranged a meeting with President Boris Tadic after Tadic returns from Moscow, where he is signing an energy agreement with Russian President Medvedev. Sutanovac confirmed to

us on December 23 that tensions with Ponos had reached a breaking point. He said that he would use all the means at his disposal, including "files" on Ponos, to fight back. Tadic's comments to date do not indicate that he will step in to resolve the dispute; on December 24 he told Tanjug that "all those who have conceptual differences should resolve them among themselves and not look for a mediator or arbitrator."

15. (SBU) There are multiple theories and rumors regarding the origin of the conflict between Sutanovac and Ponos. Some of our contacts in the security NGO community believe that Ponos is enraged by the way Sutanovac is allegedly using his position for personal gain. More observers tend to point to political rivalries within the ruling Democratic Party (DS) as the source of the tension, however; it is widely believe that President Tadic views Sutanovac as a political threat and questions his loyalty.

Comment  
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16. (SBU) Ponos's interview in "Politika" was shocking, coming from such a respected professional soldier. We believe he must have had a green light from the highest political levels to attack Sutanovac in public so boldly. The move has backed the Minister of Defense into a corner; he must now decide whether to attack Ponos personally, and risk coming across to the public as a petty politician, or take on the whole government and party structure. While there are no indications that this feud could destabilize the government, we risk losing valuable allies for reform and Euro-Atlantic integration if it results in a personnel shake-up in the Ministry of Defense and/or military. End comment.

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MUNTER